

In the 1950s, a neighbor over in Mertzon threw a late evening session into overtime telling a story of a nester and his family out West being nearly killed by cooking biscuits from baking powder laced with arsenic. The people, so he claimed, lived in the middle of a big outfit amongst plenty of hard feelings. But they thought their retching illness was from the common food poisoning that occurred so much on the frontier before refrigeration.

However, after they had thrown out all their provisions in the cupboard except the baking powder, an hombre slipped in the kitchen in the night and left the empty baking powder can by an open stove lid so they'd guess why he'd poured the contents in the ashes. More accurate diagnosis came from a local doctor who had treated patients exposed to arsenic-based cattle dips. He wound up the tale by adding that the unsolved ambush of a gunman posing as a line camp hand on the big ranch was thought to be connected to the attempted poisoning of the nester family.

In a few weeks, I became so carried away by the two crimes, I began to look around for witnesses, or informants, I trusted. Pictures existed of the family, I soon learned, and a gun collecting doctor owned the Colt six-shooter the pistolero was wearing at his death.

Further breaks came when a grandson swore his granddad, the nester, knew the hired gun was the one who came in the kitchen and dumped the baking powder in the firebox of the stove, but the grandfather never learned, the boy claimed, why he spared their lives.

None of this too great a distance from the ranch, I drove a few hundred miles on weekends gathering the testimony of four men familiar with the case to the degree one had served on the grand jury investigation of the death. All four agreed the story of the poisoning was true, but each man named a different person for the killer of the so called line camp rider.

Again, late in the night in Mertzon, the Big Boss roused me out of bed very upset. At two o'clock in the morning, he showed definite symptoms of the indisposition resulting from late hour prowling. Nevertheless, he made his case clear he knew the guilty party. He ordered me to stop thinking about what he called writing "shoot-em-ups" and start doing something important with my life, like looking after his ranch. Before the Boss left, he repeated the killer's name and swore me to secrecy.

Stuck with five killers and only one gun and one dead man, the glow wore off the story. Also, I not only had to mind the Boss as his oldest son, I guess I realized I'd better hold up and attend to other matters, such as herding bitterweed sheep and feeding old cows.

The week before this Christmas in a letter from a friend writing of a book he was researching, was the following: "You ought to know the family. Some folks thought they were mixed up in the shooting of the old boy you used to want to write about."

Forty years from my investigation and sixty some-odd years from the date of the ambush, here was number six suspect. The best thing to do seemed to be to take off and to drive out west to the county seat where the deceased's death certificate was filed to amend the cause of death to natural causes, or better, "to the uncertainties of outdoor life."

The Boss died without ever rescinding his order, especially the part about looking after his ranch. Just my luck to be under a forever living blab order on an award winning mystery story and to be indentured forever to looking after hollow horned cows.

Sure can't say I wouldn't have turned out to be a broad-based range detective. Closing the case, however, probably would have been the biggest problem...